

Vissi d'arte. Opera Singers in Italian Biopics of the 1940s and 1950s

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Abstract This essay gives an overview of the Italian opera singer's biography in its earliest formulation, starting with the advent of sound, and continuing, uninterrupted, until the 1950s. The author recognises a crucial moment in these years. She analyses it through three films dedicated to opera singers made in Italy in the 1940s and 1950s: *Maria Malibran* (Guido Brignone, 1943), *Enrico Caruso leggenda di una voce* (Giacomo Gentilomo, 1951) and *La donna più bella del mondo* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1955).

Keywords Biopic. Singer. Stardom. Metagenre. Maria Malibran.

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1 Not Just Opera Films

The volume of studies that, particularly in recent years, have addressed the relationship between cinema and opera has significantly enriched the interdisciplinary debate between musicologists and film scholars through a plurality of approaches from which “no one model has emerged, largely because of the variety of the filmic styles and the operas chosen for cinematic treatment” (Citron 2014, 46).¹

Less attention has been paid to the singers, who are tasked with materially presenting the representation of the opera (or excerpts from it) on screen, and not just in the soundtrack or as an indirect reference, mediated by recorded voice, as it is the case in reproductions of operatic records.

Certainly, the first issue posed by the opera singer is that of cinematic technology, which, unlike theatre, undermines the unity of their presence

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1 Citron's essay also draws from a rich literature devoted to this topic.



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on screen, encompassing both the physical dimension and vocal emission, due to the split between the visual and acoustic components that mechanical recording imposes on the performer. This is an unavoidable aspect, linked to the nature of the medium which, as Rick Altman observed, after the introduction of sound, makes the actor's vocal emission similar to that of a ventriloquist, since the sound does not coincide with their lips but comes from another source, namely the speakers (Altman 1980, 67-79).² On the other hand, filming an opera singer undoubtedly poses concrete problems.

close-up pictures of an opera singer hitting a note at a high volume often are unattractive. The face shows the actual strain in sending a note to the second balcony; the mouth is twisted out of shape to accommodate the vowel being produced. If the singer 'mouths' to a playback of a recording made before filming to avoid the strain and facial distortion, movie audiences may be able to detect that he is not really singing. (Parker 1980, 372-3)

There are also more contingent reasons, related to the cultural status of opera in specific cultures and historical periods: from its origins, cinema has drawn on opera as an elevated cultural horizon from which to derive benefits such as greater respectability or, alternatively, a repertoire of dramaturgical and emotional structures to draw inspiration from, making the works' titles more relevant than their performers.

A further factor is the difficulty of analysing the opera singer's performance on screen: in addition to the issues related to cinematic acting, frequently highlighted by several research,³ there are those related to the analysis of vocal aspects, which have only recently begun to receive attention (O'Rawe 2017, 157-72). In this regard, the use of various dubbing and synchronisation practices certainly makes it very complex to identify convincing approaches. To open this field of study, it appears necessary to start by focusing on the consistency of a phenomenon that remains elusive, even from a historical-critical point of view. Whilst David L. Parker provides an overview of the ways opera singers have been employed in musical cinema with an international perspective (Parker 1980, 370-86), in Italy, valuable sources include the cataloguing and classification work carried out by Gianfranco Casadio (1995), as well as a number of monographic studies on individual singers. Together, they identify a phenomenon particularly apparent in the 1930s-1950s, thanks to singers such as Gino Bechi, Maria Caniglia, Beniamino Gigli, Tito Gobbi, Tito Schipa, and Ferruccio Tagliavini. Much work remains however to be done.

Exploring how singers are employed in films with an operatic setting - and not just in opera films - ⁴ as singer-actors, as voices, or, more rarely, as

2 In a wider theoretical field, ventriloquism has been addressed by Steven Connor who investigates all forms of ventriloquism - from the ancient oracles to the present day - as forms of illusion and magic related to voices without a source, or to dissociated or displaced voices (see Connor 2000). Today's uses of digital technology have greatly emphasized this tendency, leading to a 'technovocalic body' as the result of the most varied intersections and combinations between a (supposed) body and a voice that is 'adapted' to it (see Baron, Fleeger, Wong Lerner 2021).

3 A summary of this is available in Robertson Wojcik 2004, 1-13.

4 I am adopting the definition 'film with an operatic setting' because I suggest that broadening the perspective in comparison to the sole 'opera film' in the frame of a more accurate study of the phenomenon. On this please refer to Mosconi 2018, 787-93.

actor-singers (Noto 2015),⁵ allows us to focus on linguistic and symbolic issues. On a formal level, through the roles assigned to singers, it is possible to grasp the processes of formation and articulation of cinematic genres between the fascist period and the post-war era, between continuity and transformation, but also, in the dramaturgical construction of musical sequences, it is possible to retrieve the ways in which opera and its culture are remediated for broad audiences.⁶ On a sociocultural level, it is possible to delve into both the star status of singers in cinema (and in the cultural industry as a whole),⁷ and the values associated with their image.⁸

In the following pages, attention will be focused on the biopic in highbrow music, before examining the biographical films on Italian opera singers made in the 1940s and 1950s, in an attempt to demonstrate – albeit briefly – the importance of their study.

2 The Biographical Impulse

From the early years, one of the most cultivated areas of cinema with an operatic setting has been the biographical film dedicated to figures of composers and, more rarely, singers. This is a trend that fits within a broader interest in the lives of illustrious individuals, universally known and consecrated to fame due to exceptional characteristics, which has fuelled a significant portion of cinematic production across all times and cultures.

From this perspective, cinema contributes to the process of ‘biographisation,’ enacted by the arts and humanities in modern society (Moulin 2016, 2), that is, to promoting “this personalised mode of history-telling” that “connects cinema to nineteenth-century models, relying on linearity and an accumulation of facts to provide a strong logical thread and sense of progress” (Vidal 2014, 5).

Given the variety of articulations of the biopic, it is more appropriate to speak of a ‘metagenre’ (15)⁹ as a narrative device that, in staging a significant figure from the past, interrogates the ways in which this same figure can be told, as well as their presence in the public discourse of the period in which the film is made, and the need to revive their collective memory.

The biopic’s attitude towards the lives of those who are elevated to protagonists is, with some exceptions typical of contemporaneity, celebratory: precisely because they are the centre of the representation, any character is already ‘absolved’ before entering the scene, and even the worst actions, failure, misunderstanding, and possible decline are always presented in terms of a challenge, a struggle to overcome their inner contradictions and weaknesses.

⁵ Among the actors performing as singers is also Gina Lollobrigida, as I will discuss in § 3.

⁶ Whilst it is not specifically applicable to the Italian context, William Everett’s analysis is particularly interesting (2019, 271-96).

⁷ Besides the study by Paolo Noto (2015), please refer to Di Chiara, Noto 2020, 15-37; 2019, 525-36.

⁸ An example is provided in Mosconi 2012, 197-212; see also Fleeger 2017, 31-46.

⁹ Vidal works especially on contemporary biopic, but I suggest that her claim may be applicable to the film I discuss in this text.

In other words, no life recounted – except for some villainous characters, and surely not for artists – leaves the audience distrustful or indifferent; on the contrary, the narrative is constructed to allow the audience to feel a certain degree of empathy with the protagonists. Moreover, in the case of films about musicians and singers, despite the great variety of ways in which the subjects are portrayed, a characteristic they share is that the biopic never questions the status and value of the character it refers to. The canonisation of the artist (and their works) is preconceived and incontrovertible fact: the very fact that the film is produced – that is, that it has found funding for its realisation – only attests to the collective interest in the represented character and, at the same time, further consecrates them, imposing them on the attention of the widest possible audience, also through international agreements aimed at exporting the film.

Moreover, in the case of artists, cultural memory is exercised, alongside their figures, on the works they have left behind, creating a triangulation between authors, works of art, as well as historical and contemporary reception contexts. This is a sort of intersection between biopic and *heritage movie*, another formula widely present in the debate of the last twenty years to indicate films that engage with a cultural heritage capable of negotiating forms of socially shared cultural identity.¹⁰ In the case of composers, the cultural heritage consists of the body of music they have created: the biopic cannot but openly recall them, even if in a synthetic form and, with regard to those generally best known, sometimes accompanied by reading cues (for example, the title of the score or the indication of the opera's poster) for the less cultured audiences. As John Tibbett observes, these are films that “appropriate the classical canon of ‘great lives’ and ‘great works’; strip away some of its elitist posturings, and commodify and market it to a mass audience” (2005, 12). The lives and images of composers are

modified and reconfigured into recognisable and accessible individuals who redirected and consolidated the antinomies of their genius – possessed and possessor – into the service of the social welfare and cultural aspirations of the community at large. (12)¹¹

Musical biopic and *heritage movie* share a tension towards the *middlebrow* (Faulkner 2016), that is, a range of films suitable for a middlebrow audience, who want to be gratified rather than provoked or instructed, and who approach classical music and opera through the ‘classical greatest hits.’ These are always present in the more classical musical biopic, which can be traced back to the 1930s-1960s. From a narrative perspective, the genre is predominantly focused – as Guglielmo Pescatore recalls – on a contrast “between the social and artistic sphere – the spectacle – and the individual sphere – feelings. The genius must necessarily pay a high price for their art” (Pescatore 2001, 21).¹²

10 On heritage movie in its original formulation and further variations (i.e. post-heritage, alternative heritage, film patrimonial), please see at least Higson 2003; Beylot, Moine 2009; Monk 2011.

11 The traits featuring biopics dealing with classical composers are presented in Tibbett 2015, 20-1.

12 Unless otherwise stated, all translation are by Miriam De Rosa.

However, while the film about composers highlights the creative moment in which the artist's genius manifests itself – a genius destined to be inevitably crowned by the public – the one about singers focuses on the performative aspects. In this case, the heritage that is negotiated and reinforced relies on the voice, on memorable performances that have imprinted themselves on the collective imagination thanks to the role of the media as mediators of memories (recordings, radio recordings, films) (Garde-Hansen 2011), too. Moreover, in the singer's biopic, one of the elements of greatest interest lies in the interpreter's ability to convincingly embody a star, both through acting and – in a smaller number of cases where the interpreter ventures to sing – through vocal performance (Powrie 2025, 235-41; Fife Donaldson 2014, 103-17). As we shall see, the historical distance between the figure of the singer and their cinematic 'canonisation' facilitates the task of their representation on screen: if the interpreter's figure is little known to the audience's memory, the task for the interpreters is simpler; conversely, in the recent proliferation of biopics about contemporary music scene singers, the resemblance between the actor and the singer is a fundamental condition to activate the audience's belief. In effect, one of the aspects most appreciated by the audience lies in the star's ability to bring another star (who preceded them) (Kennedy-Karpat 2019, 395-414) back to life. This explains the increasing number of contemporary biopics about singers who replace the classical music composers of the previous period, especially if we also consider that many of them combine the dual characteristic of singer and author.

In this sense, the singer's biopic always tells the process of star construction, too, from the first performances to fame, paying attention to their value and the elements that determine it. As Marcia Landy observes,

the narratives of stardom embed a number of elements that comprise the star as a powerful cultural commodity. The material and historical conditions of their production are inherent to star narratives, both biographical and cinematic, textual and extra-textual. The economy of stardom is never completely effaced. In its operations, it exposes how the commodity is produced, how it circulates, and how it rises and falls in value according to its moment in time. The biographical and cinematic texts of and with stars expose the intervention of entrepreneurs, agents, managers, and patrons in directing the career of the performer both in the narratives of discovery and in subsequent shaping of the trajectory of the star's career. (Landy 2004, 213)

Considering these premises, we can now outline an overview of the Italian singer's biopic in its first formulation, which moves from the advent of sound and continues, without interruption, into the 1950s.

3 A Flash, a Dream, a Game

Alongside the numerous biographies of composers, there are three films dedicated to opera singers made in Italy in the 1940s and 1950s:¹³ it is a small number compared to the biographies of composers that follow with greater regularity in the same period, aimed at celebrating the primacy of Italian musicians.

The first is *Maria Malibran*, directed by Guido Brignone and released in February 1943. It stars Maria Cebotari, a Romanian soprano active in Germany and Austria, who appeared in a number of films with an operatic setting made between Italy and Germany, often directed by Carmine Gallone and scripted by Thea von Harbou. Whilst the singer's notoriety in the Axis countries is a prerequisite for the exploitation of the film in German-speaking markets,¹⁴ Brignone's film nevertheless represents for Maria Cebotari the final act of a cinematic career destined to give way, after the end of the conflict, to a brief concert season ending with her death in 1949. As for Maria Malibran (1808-1836), a Franco-Belgian singer of Spanish origin, married in America and active in Italian and European theatres, her memory is still alive almost a century later. *La Lettura* recalls her as follows:

An exceptional artistic temperament, a fervent intelligence, a nature overflowing with vitality, whose manifestations shake and impress like the violent and sudden light of a firework: such was Malibran. [...] A singer who spoke five languages, who drew and embroidered, who was skilled and talented in fencing, swimming, and horse riding; who knew how to play and compose romances. (Cametti 1921, 907)¹⁵

Precisely the difference between the character of the "generous and ardent nineteenth-century heroine" and that of the "graceful and intelligent Cebotari"¹⁶ is considered by critics to be one of the film's weakest points. Not even the body and voice of the singer, the former of which is given numerous close-ups, especially in performative moments, and her undoubted acting competence, manage to make the film more vivid. This remains rather descriptive, and aims more at recreating an environment and a figure than at deeply understanding the personality and main features of the protagonist. Maria Malibran in the film appears caught between male figures who overshadow her: on the emotional level, between the dissolute and violent husband Eugène Malibran and the protective violinist Charles Auguste de Bériot; on the professional level, between the wise and facetious Gioacchino Rossini and the restless (and enamoured) Vincenzo Bellini.¹⁷

13 On Italian musical biopic, with a specific focus on the relationships between sources and musical sequences, please refer to Renata Scognamiglio 2011, 65-75. I would like to thank Alfonso Venturini for having granted me access to rare materials devoted to Maria Malibran

14 "Indiscrezioni dell'obiettivo cinematografico". *Corriere della Sera*, 1942, 14-15, 3. There is no news regarding the German distribution of the film.

15 More on the singer here: Giazotto 1986; Girardi 2012, 31-50. See also Leonardi 2022.

16 Maria Malibran "has resurrected in a calmer, tamed, poisonless, cruelty free version, one without the fool burst that characterised her real life" (Calcagno 1943, transl. by M. De Rosa).

17 In his review of the film Raul Radice writes that composers Bellini and Rossini "behave more roughly [than in previous films], appearing nearly too free from historical circumstances or from the chronicle of the time". "Rassegna cinematografica", *Corriere della Sera*, 7 febbraio 1943, 2.

It is no coincidence that – forcing historical truth – the singer feels very close to the latter, and her death occurs (almost) on stage, after singing the famous final aria from *La sonnambula*, *Ah, non credea mirarti* in a visibly altered state.¹⁸

In this way, Maria Malibran (with her interpreter Maria Cebotari) builds a sort of bridge between two phases of opera history expressed through the reference to two composers, Rossini and Bellini, to whom national cinema has paid a specific attention: both with the film *Rossini* (1942) starring Nino Besozzi and directed by Mario Bonnard, and with *Casta diva* (1935) by Carmine Gallone, focused on the youth of the Catania-born musician (played by Sandro Palmieri) and the origin of the famous aria from *Norma*.¹⁹ This path is made apparent by the series of pieces sung by the protagonist: from the *cavatina* of Semiramide *Bel raggio lusinghier*, from the ninth scene of the first act of the eponymous opera, to the final *rondo* of *Cenerentola* (*Non più mesta accanto al fuoco*), then hinting at the famous *Casta diva* and reprising, twice, the final aria of Amina, in *La sonnambula*, *Ah, non credea mirarti*. The film's music is also drawn from the repertoire of Rossini and Bellini, adapted by Renzo Rossellini. The film serves as a vehicle for the transmission of Italian musical genius and culture to the world, through a cosmopolitan and unsurpassed prima donna like Maria Malibran.

In October 1951, thirty years after the singer's death, *Enrico Caruso leggenda di una voce* was released, directed by Giacomo Gentilomo: as the title suggests, it is a fictionalised biography, indebted to Frank Thiess' volume (1942),²⁰ which recalls in anecdotal form Caruso's childhood and youth until 1896, the year of the Sicilian tour that marked the beginning of his great fame. The film highlights the Neapolitan setting, in which the singer's personality is defined by the poverty suffered in the childhood years, the first singing experiences, the encounters with singing teachers, impresarios, and influential people destined to eventually direct his career. The narrative emphasises melodramatic aspects, blending the director's taste with the characteristics of Neapolitan and operatic films, as it is had already been shown in *O sole mio* (Giacomo Gentilomo, 1946).²¹ In particular, whilst the male characters have the task of either favouring or hindering Caruso on a professional level, the female ones act in the emotional area, becoming vehicles for deeper motivations. The mother Anna, played by the Hungarian-born actress and singer Mária Tasnády, is the one who intuitively recognises her son's talents early on, encourages him to sing, and in return receives deep and religious veneration. The film lingers on her illness and death: sick and exhausted, Anna prays her fifteen-year-old son to go to church to sing for the Corpus Domini service during which, in a sort of mystical communion with him, she draws her last breath, while Enrico's distant singing distinctly plays on. Later, her spirit appears to her son to

¹⁸ [Guglielmina Setti], "Le prime dello schermo. Maria Malibran". *Il Lavoro*, 7 febbraio 1943, 3.

¹⁹ See Bono 2004; Sala 2024 (see in particular the contributions by Graziella Seminara (88-107) and Giuliano Danieli (110-35).

²⁰ The book was published several times in Germany and in 1946 was followed by the volume *Caruso in Sorrent* (Hamburg: Hamburger Buchring). In Italy the book was instead published just twice, with the second edition following the film and being retitled *La leggenda d'una voce* in 1952 (Roma: Casa Editrice Mediterranea).

²¹ Please see De Giusti 2008 for a portrait of the director; on the film, see Noto 2011, 86-7.

comfort him at difficult times, while her portrait is shown several times and at length like a sacred effigy.

The other female presence in the film is young Stella's, played by Gina Lollobrigida, erected as a symbol of the singer's first romantic infatuations. Their friendship strengthens over several fleeting encounters, but the age difference and social condition prevent the birth of a romantic relationship, despite mutual attraction. In the end, renouncing to an adulterous relationship – as Stella is married to a wealthy Sicilian baron – becomes the indispensable condition for Caruso's success.²² Through the encounters between Stella and Enrico, Gentilomo articulates a visual discourse in three movements, simple but effective, on the power of singing. In the first, young Enrico sings *Voce 'e notte* (by Ernesto De Curtis and Eduardo Nicolardi) and the girl, moved, at the end of the song kisses him on the lips. The second contact occurs during an audition at the Teatro San Carlo: Stella sneaks into the boxes and captures the pathos that the tenor puts into interpreting *Vesti la giubba*. The words of Canio, the protagonist of *Pagliacci* who is aware of his beloved's betrayal, also express Caruso's nostalgia for the woman he will never possess, while the camera lingers on the actress' face, validating this parallelism. The gaze of the two lovers never meets, yet the song effectively mediates their relationship: Caruso's voice, charged with a "performative power" (Beghelli 2005, 826; transl. by M. De Rosa), expresses their pain. At the definitive moment of farewell, Stella reveals to Caruso the power of his voice: "It is she who commands. Your voice does not belong to you, you belong to her", and assures him that as long as he will sing, she will always feel united with him. On Stella's face is imprinted the echo of Caruso's song.

Parallel to the sentimental story, on the professional side the film also presents a journey of vocal education. Caruso is the street urchin who struggles to achieve success, and follows a trajectory that moves from children's choirs in which he sings as a contralto, through several performances as a street singer and lessons with various teachers, up to the stabilisation of his vocal register between tenor and baritone, and the performances in theatres. Even in this case, he must surrender to the lack of unity of body and voice: not only is the character of Caruso played by two different actors, in the part of the child singer (Maurizio Di Nardo) and then the adult (Ermanno Randi), but his singing voice does not belong to him, as it is replaced by that of Gina Lollobrigida for the contralto parts and by Mario Del Monaco for the tenor parts. The incompleteness of Caruso's biographical journey proposed by the film, which stops at the threshold of maturity and fame rather than proposing a 'cradle-to-grave' development, seems to highlight this double lack of fulfilment and integrity both on the emotional and vocal level.²³

Four years later, Gina Lollobrigida returns as the protagonist of Robert Z. Leonard's film *Beautiful But Dangerous* – original title: *La donna più bella del mondo* (*Lina Cavalieri*) –, a free biographical evocation of the famous Belle

²² Stella's farewell to Enrico unfolds through the following declaration: "Only tonight I understood that I love you, and have always loved you. I will never be happy, and I will feel alone, because this is the last time we are going to see each other, Rico. We will never meet again. But your mother will always be at your side" (Transl. by M. De Rosa).

²³ In the same year another biopic on Caruso is released in the United States, *The Great Caruso* (*Il grande Caruso*), directed by Richard Thorpe, produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and starring the Italo-American Mario Lanza (see Landy 2004, 213-27; Mosconi 2011, 36-45).

Époque Italian singer,²⁴ in which the actress also performs the role of singer, thus mending the fracture between star body and voice of the previous film.²⁵ This work is promoted by Maleno Malenotti, already screenwriter of *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce*, serving now as producer and author of the subject: in evoking Lina Cavalieri's career as a singer and international diva, the film operates an overlap with the actress Lollobrigida, so as to consecrate both. From the very outset, the character of Lina Cavalieri is presented as a symbol of beauty, at times through rather explicit metaphors. This is the case of a sequence set at the Théâtre des Folies-Plastiques, where Gina/Lina is the protagonist of a musical fantasy entitled 'The Most Beautiful Woman in the World' interpreting the archetype of beauty of all times: as a caption explains for less cultured audiences, the scenes range from an evocation of *The Birth of Venus*, explicitly inspired by Botticelli's painting,²⁶ to *Cleopatra, Beauty of the Ancient World*, and finally to the coronation of *Lina Cavalieri, Beauty of the Modern World*.

In the transition from a young actress in Roman variety shows to a star of Parisian theatres, the protagonist becomes increasingly determined and aware of her seductive power, which drives her to seek to attract the gaze of others, if necessary, by displaying her body. In a key scene that takes place during a duel to which she has been challenged by her rival Manolita, Lina Cavalieri/Gina Lollobrigida – arrived by bicycle at the meeting place, wearing a tight, provocative D'Artagnan-style male costume – strips down to her corset before beginning the unusual combat, to the astonishment of the onlookers. The surprise effect, amplified by the publicity machine on the scene, enhances her star status.²⁷ At the same time, the woman demonstrates uncommon athletic qualities, achieved through exercise, which are revealed to be necessary to defeat her opponent. This is a superiority conquered at the cost of effort, which seems to compensate and discipline the destabilising effect of her sensuality.

Similarly, singing also appears from the beginning of the film as the result of skills acquired through study, which allow her to move from the repertoire of Roman variety (*A frangesa*) to the arias of *Tosca*, without even a slight variation in Gina Lollobrigida's voice timbre or expressiveness. Only commitment allows her to ascend to the great theatres of the world, enabling her to courageously tackle the challenging notes of opera.²⁸ In this way, the filmic image of Lollobrigida – beautiful, determined, and talented – comes to almost entirely coincide with the extra-filmic image disseminated by the media: in Richard Dyer's words, it is a perfect fit between cinematic fiction and star's construction (Dyer 1979, 157-8).²⁹ The film, "a Lollobrigida vehicle", is "conceived, prepared, and produced for the actress to offer her

²⁴ On Lina Cavalieri please refer to Fryer, Usova 2003. Italian readers can also see the autobiographical volume Cavalieri [1936] 2021.

²⁵ On this separation, especially in the case of female characters, please see Fleeger 2014, especially ch. 3; Jeongwon 2013 (especially ch. 5).

²⁶ Gabriele d'Annunzio famously defined Lina Cavalieri as the "highest expression of Venus on earth". See Di Tizio 2019, 159-71.

²⁷ On this very scene, as more broadly as Gina Lollobrigida as a star, please see Vitella 2024, 153-4.

²⁸ In the film, Gina Lollobrigida sings the finale of the third act from *Tosca*, as well as the aria from the second act, *Vissi d'arte*.

²⁹ Italian readers can also refer to Hediger 2000, 29-35.

all-available opportunities to shine and to present to the public the full range of her possibilities" (Kezich 1955, 37).

Gina Lollobrigida is an active part in this process, since through her husband Milko Skofic she co-finances the film for an amount equal to her fee. Also, the contract clauses, which reserve her the right to use a screenwriter and a director of her choice (Robert Z. Leonard, the Hollywood director of *Ziegfeld Girl*) and to impose her name in block letters on the big screen, reflect the will to establish a programmatic identification between herself (Gina) and Lina (Cavalieri).³⁰

The examples show how these films are not only influenced by a generic nostalgic impulse,³¹ but intend to pass on a heritage of characters and memories that is already belonging to collective imagination and finds new life in cinema, conveying a system of values which becomes updated to modernity. In this sense, within the broader category of musical biopic, the films dedicated to opera singers in the two decades under consideration outline a precise itinerary. *Maria Malibran* highlights the transition process from biopics dedicated to composers to those related to singers, emphasising the role played by the 'prima donna' in assessing the success of the works and the growing importance of stardom in the operatic system. *Enrico Caruso leggenda di una voce* shifts the focus to cinematic melodrama as a genre that draws on the heritage of passions displayed by opera to translate it into pre-packaged formulas, underscoring at the same time the threat represented by the conflict between voice and body. Finally, *La donna più bella del mondo (Lina Cavalieri)* underlines the importance (also on a commercial level) of the new stardom, which can be accessed through natural gifts (beauty) combined with professional ones (exercise). These are processes that can be grasped by broadening the gaze from the investigation of cineopera to a broader field, such as that of films with an operatic setting. Singer's biopics represent a subcategory of such films, they are an expansion that indirectly accounts for the changing and remediation of operatic culture in the national cultural fabric. In light of the present and of the growing importance of acting performance, the impersonation of the singer (but the discourse also applies to a composer, rather than a sportsman or an artist) appears as the symptom and the outcome of an inexhaustible process of biographisation. Grasping such process illuminates the implications in today's increasingly creation of a new (and yet always second) stardom.

30 See Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri. Servizi Spettacolo, Informazione e Proprietà Intellettuale, folder 2199, *La donna più bella del mondo*. The folder contains production figures, the censorship record, as well as the materials about the Lina Cavalieri's family lawsuit aimed at the preservation of her image.

31 This is aptly suggested in Morreale 2009, 47-56.



Mod. 139 (A)

REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

MINISTERO DEL TURISMO E DELLO SPETTACOLO

DIREZIONE GENERALE DELLO SPETTACOLO

Domanda di revisione

55099-
-1 DIC. 1969

Il sottoscritto Pietro Maleno Malenotti residente a Roma
Via Nizza 56 legale rappresentante della Ditta GRAM FILM S.r.l.

Tel. 866.539 con sede a Roma, Via Nizza 56 domanda, in nome e per conto della Ditta stessa,

la revisione della pellicola dal titolo: "LA DONNA PIU' BELLA DEL MONDO" (2^a edizione)

di nazionalità: italiana produzione: Ge.S.I. Cinematografica anno '55

dichiarando che la pellicola stessa viene per la prima volta sottoposta alla revisione.

Lunghezza dichiarata metri 3.205 accertata metri 3205

Roma, li 6 Novembre 1969 p. NAZIONALE

DESCRIZIONE DEL SOGGETTO

Lina Cavalieri, una bellissima ragazza di Trastevere, sostituisce la mamma che si è sentita male sulle scene di un teatrino di Trastevere. Qui incontra per la prima volta il principe Sergio Bariatine. Sergio la protegge e la difende dai soprusi di un giovanastro del quartiere e quando apprende le tristi condizioni della fanciulla, le dona del denaro ed un anello prezioso.

Lina è rimasta orfana e pensa sempre al suo principe azzurro. Con il denaro ricevuto da lui prende lezioni di canto dal celebre Maestro Doria. Spera di diventare celebre, incontrare nuovamente il principe e farsi amare da lui.

Doria la conduce a Parigi per farla debuttare. E' innamoratissimo di lei ma Lina non può e non vuole ricambiare il suo amore.

Allontanatasi da Doria è nuovamente sola e per guadagnarsi da vivere canta e danza all'Eldorado dove, in breve tempo, conquista le simpatie del pubblico.

La vedetta del locale, ingelosita per il crescente successo di Lina, la sfida al duello sperando di trarre profitto da quella insolata forma di pubblicità. Ma la sfida si risolve in una strabiliante vittoria per Lina, la quale viene scritturata alle "Folies Plastiques".

Durante uno spettacolo grandioso allestito per lei, rivede il principe Sergio il quale, come tutta Parigi è in un palco ad ammirare "La più Bella Donna del mondo". Egli non riconosce Lina e gli amici gli raccontano come la bellissima donna sia ritenuta da tutti "irraggiungibile". Sergio scommette che riuscirà a conquistarla e infatti, invitata al Palazzo Bariatine e rimasto solo con lei, non ha difficoltà a condurla nello chalet del parco dove gli si abbandona e gli rivela di averlo sempre amato dal giorno in cui lo incontrò per la prima volta nel teatrino di Trastevere.

Sergio, sconvolto dalla rivelazione, è pentito per la sciocca promessa fatta con gli amici, ma mentre sta per confessare a Lina il suo amore e chiederle perdono, arrivano gli amici e Lina fugge indignata per l'offesa ricevuta.

Lina Cavalieri è misteriosamente scomparsa. Amorevolmente confortata dal tenore Mario Silvani, ella si è ritirata in una casetta di campagna, per perfezionare lo studio del canto. Mario la farà debuttare con lui nella opera Tosca e il Maestro Doria, che sembra non nutrire più alcun rancore per Lina, sarà il direttore. Lina ha promesso a Mario di sposarlo. La sera del debutto Sergio è tornato per implorare il perdono di Lina e portarla con sé in Russia, ma all'ultimo atto della Tosca, quando il protagonista deve cadere sotto il fuoco del plotone di esecuzione, un sicario assoldato da Doria lo fulmina con una mira infallibile.

Nessuno ha mai sospettato di Doria e neppure Lina la quale è convinta, invece, che l'assassino sia Sergio.

Lina e Doria riprendono la loro tournée per il mondo, finché giungono alla imperiale Corte di Russia dove Lina incontra ancora una volta Sergio. Lina accetta di cantare la Tosca, ma giunti al terzo atto della drammatica scena della fucilazione Doria crolla sul podio confessando il suo delitto.

Sergio e Lina possono finalmente riunirsi in un abbraccio appassionato ed insieme si avviano verso la felicità.

DESCRIZIONE DELLE MODIFICHE

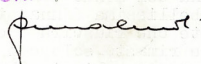
La riedizione del film che viene sottoposta alla Commissione di Censura, presenta, rispetto alla prima edizione le seguenti modifiche:

- Revisione di tutto il montaggio, per dare al film un tono più veloce e serrato, mediante eliminazione di pause e scene lente. In particolare:
 - Abolizione di metà circa della canzone cantata dalla madre di Lina Cavalieri;
 - Taglio del colloquio Bariatine-Cavalieri-Cameriera nel corridoio del caffè-chantant;
 - Taglio del finale balletto can-can nella scena in cui le ballerine alzano le gonne;
 - Inserimento di esterni campo lungo concorso ippico di Piazza di Siena ma taglio nel medesimo ambiente, del dettaglio su Lina Cavalieri;
 - Taglio dell'intero balletto "Nascita di Venere" nel quale Lina Cavalieri appare seminuda, avvolta in una leggera calzamaglia;
 - Eliminazione di una lunga sequenza di Viaggio di Lina Cavalieri in Russia;
 - Revisione delle musiche della "Tosca" per la parte cantata, che si erano deteriorate.

In totale il metraggio attuale è stato portato a m. 3.205.-

Si fa presente che la copia presentata alla Commissione non è nuova, ma è una copia usata per la lavorazione per il nuovo montaggio.

GRAM FILM s.r.l.



3 J A 9 5 9

La VII Sezione della Commissione di revisione
Cinematografica, esaminato il film il 13-01-1969
esprime parere favorevole per la proiezione in pubblico
senza limiti di età e per l'esportazione.

M. Ricci

S. J. M.

S. J. M.

Vista la legge 21 aprile 1962, n. 161;
Vista la ricevuta del versamento in conto corrente postale n. 246
dell'Ufficio Roma 26 intestato al Ricevitore del Registro di Roma per il pagamento della
tassa di L. 80.300

SU CONFORME parere espresso dalla Commissione di revisione cinematografica di 1° grado

D E C R E T A

NULLA OSTA alla rappresentazione in pubblico del film La donna più bella del mondo
a condizione di non modificare in guisa alcuna il titolo, i sottotitoli e le scritture della pellicola, di non sostituire i quadri e le scene relative, di non aggiungerne altre e di non alterarne, in qualsiasi modo, l'ordine senza autorizzazione del Ministero.

✓

Ai fini esclusivi della revisione, se ne autorizza anche l'esportazione.
Questo film non è soggetto a revisione per l'esportazione.

Roma, li 13-12-1969

IL MINISTRO
S. J. M.

N.B. — Il presente modulo non è valido se non munito del timbro del Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo - Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo.

STAMPATI PER LA CINEMATOGRAFIA
Via Saurafaluno. 7 - Roma - Tel. 429.007

Figures 1-3 Faldone 55099, *La donna più bella del mondo*, 01/12/1969. Direzione Generale Cinema e Audiovisivi, Roma, Archivio della censura cinematografica

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